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MY DOG

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The only Being that has found an Indubitably
Tangible God

My Dog

By Maurice Maeterlinck

Translated by A. Teixeira de Mattos

With Illustrations in Colour by

Cecil Aldin

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MY DOG

I

I HAVE lost, within these last few days, a little bull-dog. He had just completed the sixth month of his brief existence. He had no history. His intelligent eyes opened to look out upon the world, to love mankind, then closed again on the cruel secrets of death.

The friend who presented me with him had given him, perhaps by antiphrasis, the somewhat unex-

pected name of Pelléas. Why re-christen him? For how can a poor dog, loving, devoted, faithful, disgrace the name of a man or an imaginary hero?

Pelléas had a great, bulging, powerful forehead, like that of Socrates or Verlaine; and, under a little black nose, blunt as a churlish assent, a pair of large, hanging and symmetrical chops, which made his head a sort of massive, obstinate, pensive and three-cornered menace. He was beautiful after the manner of a beautiful, natural monster that has complied

Beautiful after the Manner of a Beautiful,
Natural Monster

strictly with the laws of its species. And what a smile of attentive obligingness, of incorruptible innocence, of affectionate submission, of boundless gratitude and total self-abandonment lit up, at the least caress, that adorable mask of ugliness! Whence exactly did that smile emanate? From the ingenuous and melting eyes? From the ears pricked up to catch the words of man? From the forehead that unwrinkled to appreciate and love, from the four tiny, white, projecting teeth that shone with gladness against the dark lips, or from the stump of a tail

that, with its abrupt bend, the mark of his race, wriggled at the other end to testify to the intimate and impassioned joy that filled his small being, happy once more to encounter the hand or the glance of the god to whom he surrendered himself?

Pelléas was born in Paris and I had taken him to the country. His bonny fat paws, shapeless and not yet stiffened, carried slackly through the unexplored pathways of his new existence his huge and serious head, flat-nosed and, as it were, rendered heavy with thought.

For this thankless and rather sad head, like that of an overworked child, was beginning the overwhelming work that oppresses every brain at the start of life. He had, in less than five or six weeks, to get into his mind, taking shape within it, an image and a satisfactory conception of the universe. Man, aided by all the knowledge of his own elders and his brothers, takes thirty or forty years to outline that conception, or rather to heap up around it, as around a palace in the clouds, the consciousness of an increasing ignorance; but

the humble dog has to unravel it for himself in a few days: and yet, in the eyes of a god who should know all things, would it not have almost the same weight and the same value as our own?

It was a question, then, of studying the ground, which can be scratched and dug up and which sometimes conceals surprising things: earth-worms and white worms, moles, field-mice, crickets; of casting at the sky, which is uninteresting, for there is nothing there to eat, one glance that does away with it for good and all; of

Learn to Calculate the Height of Objects
from the Top of which you can Jump

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discovering the grass, the admirable and green grass, the springy and cool grass, a field for races and sports, a friendly and boundless bed, in which lies hidden the good and wholesome couch-grass. It was a question also of taking promiscuously a thousand urgent and curious observations. It was necessary, for instance, with no other guide than pain, to learn to calculate the height of objects from the top of which you can jump into space; to convince yourself that it is vain to pursue birds who fly away, and that you are unable to clamber

up trees after the cats who publicly insult you ; to distinguish between the sunny spots where it is delicious to sleep and the patches of shade in which you shiver ; to remark with stupefaction that the rain does not fall inside the houses, that water is cold, uninhabitable and dangerous, while fire is beneficent at a distance, but terrible when you come too near ; to observe that the meadows, the farmyards and sometimes the roads are haunted by giant creatures with threatening horns, creatures good-natured, perhaps, and, at any rate,

silent, creatures who allow you to sniff at them a little indiscreetly without taking offence, but who keep their real thoughts to themselves; to become aware, as the result of painful and humiliating experiment, that you are not at liberty to obey all nature's laws without distinction in the dwelling of the gods; to recognise that the kitchen is the privileged and most agreeable spot in that divine dwelling, although you are not allowed to abide in it because of the cook, who is a considerable, but jealous power; to learn that doors are important and

capricious volitions, which sometimes lead to felicity, but which most often, hermetically closed, mute and stern, haughty and heartless, remain deaf to all entreaties ; to admit, once and for all, that the essential good things of life, the indisputable blessings, generally imprisoned in pots and stew-pans, are almost always inaccessible ; to know how to look at them with laboriously-acquired indifference and to practise to take no notice of them, saying to yourself that here are objects which are probably sacred, since merely to skim them with the tip of

a respectful tongue is enough to let loose, as though by magic, the unanimous anger of all the gods of the house. . . .

2

And then, what is one to think of the table on which so many things happen that cannot be guessed; of the derisive chairs on which one is forbidden to sleep; of the plates and dishes that are empty by the time that one can get at them; of the lamp that drives away the dark, and of the hearth that puts the cold to

flight? . . . How many orders, dangers, prohibitions, problems, riddles has one not to classify in one's overburdened memory! . . . And how to reconcile all this with other laws, other riddles, wider and more imperious, which one bears within one's self, within one's instinct, which spring up and develop from one hour to the other, which come from the depths of time and the race, invade the blood, the muscles and the nerves and suddenly assert themselves more irresistibly and more powerfully than pain, the

word of the master himself, or the fear of death?

Thus, for instance, to quote only one example, when the hour of sleep has struck for men, you have retired to your hole, surrounded by the darkness, the silence and the formidable solitude of the night. All is asleep in the master's house. You feel yourself very small and weak in the presence of the mystery. You know that the gloom is peopled with foes who hover and lie in wait. You suspect the trees, the passing wind and the moonbeams. You would like to hide,

to suppress yourself by holding your breath. But still the watch must be kept; you must, at the least sound, issue from your retreat, face the invisible and bluntly disturb the imposing silence of the stars, at the risk of bringing down the whispering evil or crime upon yourself alone. Whoever the enemy be, even if he be man, that is to say the very brother of the god whom it is your business to defend, you must attack him blindly, fly at his throat, fasten your perhaps sacrilegious teeth into human flesh, disregard the spell of a hand and voice

similar to those of your master, never be silent, never attempt to escape, never allow yourself to be tempted or bribed and, lost in the night without help, prolong the heroic alarm to your last breath.

That is the great ancestral duty, the essential duty, stronger than death, which not even man's will and anger are able to check. All our humble history, linked with that of the dog in our first struggles against every breathing thing, all this humble and appalling history springs up again nightly in the primitive memory of

him who was our friend in evil days. And, when, in our safer dwelling-places of to-day, we happen to punish him for his untimely zeal, he throws us a glance of astonished reproach, as though to point out to us that we are in the wrong and that, if we lose sight of the main clause in the treaty of alliance which he made with us at the time when we lived in caves, forests and fens, he continues faithful to it in spite of us and remains nearer to the eternal truth of life, which is full of snares and hostile forces.

3

But how much care and study are needed to succeed in fulfilling this duty! And how complicated it has become since the days of the silent caverns and the great deserted lakes! It was so simple, then, so easy and so clear. The lonely hollow opened upon the side of the hill; and all that approached, all that moved on the horizon of the plains or woods was the unmistakable enemy! . . . But to-day you can no longer tell. . . . You have to acquaint yourself with a

civilization of which you disapprove, to appear to understand a thousand incomprehensible things. . . . Thus, it seems evident that henceforth the whole world no longer belongs to the master, that his property conforms to unintelligible limits. . . . It becomes necessary, therefore, first of all to know exactly where the sacred domain begins and ends. Whom are you to suffer, whom to stop? . . . There is the road by which every one, even the poor man, has the right to pass. Why? You do not know; it is a fact which you deplore, but which you are

bound to accept. Fortunately, on the other hand, here is the fair path, the private way, which none may tread. This path is faithful to the sound traditions; it is not to be lost sight of; for by it enter into your daily existence the difficult problems of life.

Would you have an example? You are sleeping peacefully in a ray of the sun that covers the threshold of the kitchen with animated and wanton pearls. The earthenware pots amuse themselves by elbowing and nudging one another on the edge of the shelves trimmed with paper

lace-work. The copper stew-pans play at scattering spots of light over the smooth white walls. The motherly stove hums a soft tune and dandles three saucepans blissfully dancing; and, from the little hole that lights up its inside, defies the good dog, who cannot approach, by constantly putting out at him its fiery tongue. The clock, bored in its oak case, before striking the august hour of meal-time, swings its great gilt navel to and fro; and the cunning flies tease your ears. On the glittering table lie a chicken, a hare, three

partridges, besides other things which are called fruits or vegetables—peas, beans, peaches, melons, grapes—and which are all good for nothing. The cook guts a big silver fish and throws the entrails (instead of giving them to you !) into the dust-bin. Ah, the dust-bin ! Inexhaustible treasury, receptacle of windfalls, the jewel of the house ! You shall have your share of it, an exquisite and surreptitious share ; but it does not do to seem to know where it is. You are strictly forbidden to rummage in it. Man in this way prohibits many pleasant

things; and life would be dull and your days would be empty, if you had to obey all the orders of the pantry, the cellar and the dining-room. Luckily, he is absent-minded and does not long remember the instructions which he lavishes. He is easily deceived. You achieve your ends and do as you please, provided that you know how to bide your time patiently. You are subject to man, and he is the one god; but you none the less have your own personal, exact and imperturbable morality, which proclaims aloud that forbidden acts

become most lawful through the very fact that they are performed without the master's knowledge. Therefore, let us close the watchful eye that has seen. Let us pretend to sleep and to dream of the moon. . . .

Hark! A gentle tapping at the blue window that looks out on the garden! . . . What is it? . . . Nothing; a bough of hawthorn that has come to see what we are doing in the cool kitchen. Trees are inquisitive and often agitated ; but they do not count, you have nothing to say to them, they are irresponsible, they obey the wind,

which has no principles. . . . But what is that? I hear steps! . . . Up, ears pricked; nose on the alert! . . . It is the baker coming up to the rails, while the postman opens a little gate in the hedge of lime-trees. . . . They are friends; it is well; they bring something: you can greet them and wag a discreet tail twice or thrice, with a patronizing smile. . . .

Another alarm! What is it now? . . . A carriage pulls up in front of the steps. The problem is a complex one. Before all, it is of consequence to heap copious insults on the horses,

You can Greet Them and Wag a Discreet Tail
twice or thrice with a patronising Smile

great, proud beasts, always sweating and always in their Sunday best, who make no reply. Meantime, you examine out of the corner of your eye the persons alighting. They are well-clad and seem full of confidence. They are probably going to sit at the table of the gods. The proper thing is to bark without acrimony, with a shade of respect, so as to show that you are doing your duty, but that you are doing it with intelligence. Nevertheless, you cherish a lurking suspicion and, behind the guests' backs, stealthily, you sniff

the air persistently and in a knowing way, in order to discern any hidden intentions.

4

But halting footsteps resound outside the kitchen. This time it is the poor man dragging his crutch, the essential enemy, the specific enemy, the hereditary enemy, the direct descendant of him who roamed outside the bone-crammed cave which you suddenly see again in your racial memory. Drunk with indignation, your bark broken, your teeth

multiplied with hatred and rage, you are about to seize the irreconcilable adversary by the breeches, when the cook, armed with her broom, the ancillary and forsworn sceptre, comes to protect the traitor; and you are obliged to go back to your hole, where, with eyes filled with impotent and slanting flames, you growl out frightful, but futile curses, thinking within yourself that this is the end of all things, that there are no laws left, and that mankind has lost its notion of justice and injustice. . . .

Is that all? Not yet; for the smallest life is made up of innumerous duties, and it is a long work to organize a happy existence upon the borderland of two such different worlds as the world of beasts and the world of men. How should we fare, if we had to serve, while remaining within our own sphere, a divinity, not an imaginary one, like to ourselves, because the offspring of our own brain, but a god actually visible, ever present, ever active, and as foreign, as superior to our being as we are to the dog?

MY DOG

5

We now, to return to Pelléas, know pretty well what to do and how to behave on the master's premises. But the world does not end at the house-door, and, beyond the walls and beyond the hedge, there is a universe of which we have not the custody, where we are no longer at home, where relations are changed. How are we to stand in the street, in the fields, in the market-place, in the shops? In consequence of difficult and delicate observations, we

understand that we must take no notice of passers-by ; obey no calls but the master's ; be polite, with indifference, to strangers who pet us. Next, we must conscientiously fulfil certain obligations of mysterious courtesy towards our brothers the other dogs; respect chickens and ducks; not appear to remark the cakes at the pastry-cook's, which spread themselves insolently within reach of the tongue; show to the cats, who, on the steps of the houses, provoke us by hideous grimaces, a silent contempt, but one that will not forget;

Show to the Cats who Provoke us by Hideous Grimaces a Silent Contempt

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and remember that it is lawful and even commendable to chase and strangle mice, rats, wild rabbits, and, generally speaking, all animals (we learn to know them by secret marks) that have not yet made their peace with man.

6

All this and so much more! . . . Was it surprising that Pelléas often appeared thoughtful in the face of those numberless problems, and that his humble and gentle look was sometimes so profound and grave,

laden with cares and full of unreadable questions?

Alas, he did not have time to finish the long and heavy task which nature lays upon the instinct that rises in order to approach a brighter region. . . . An ill of a mysterious character, which seems specially to punish the only animal that succeeds in leaving the circle in which it is born; an indefinite ill that carries off hundreds of intelligent little dogs came to put an end to the destiny and the happy education of Pelléas. I saw him, during two or three days, already

An Ill of a Mysterious Character

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staggering tragically under the enormous burden of death, yet grateful for the least caress. . . . And now all those efforts to achieve a little more light; all that ardour in loving, that courage in understanding; all that affectionate gaiety; all those kind and devoted looks which turned to man to ask for his aid against unjust and inexplicable sufferings; all those flickering gleams which came from the profound abyss of a world that is no longer ours; all those nearly human little habits lie sadly in the cold ground, under a

spreading elder-tree, in a corner of the garden. . . .

7

Man loves the dog, but how much more ought he to love it, if he considered, in the inflexible harmony of the laws of nature, the sole exception, which is that love which succeeds in piercing, in order to draw closer to us, the partitions, every elsewhere impermeable, that separate the species! We are alone, absolutely alone, on this chance planet; and, amid all the forms of life that

surround us, not one, excepting the dog, has made an alliance with us. A few creatures fear us, most are unaware of us, and not one loves us. In the world of plants, we have dumb and motionless slaves; but they serve us in spite of themselves. They simply endure our laws and our yoke. They are impotent prisoners, victims incapable of escaping, but silently rebellious; and, so soon as we lose sight of them, they hasten to betray us, and return to their former wild and mischievous liberty. The rose and the corn, had they

wings, would fly at our approach like the birds.

Among the animals, we number a few servants who have submitted only through indifference, cowardice, or stupidity : the uncertain and craven horse, who responds only to pain and is attached to nothing ; the passive and dejected ass, who stays with us only because he knows not what to do nor where to go, but who, nevertheless, under the cudgel and the pack-saddle, retains the idea that lurks behind his ears ; the cow and the ox, happy so long as they

are eating, and docile because, for centuries, they have not had a thought of their own; the affrighted sheep, who knows no other master than terror; the hen, who is faithful to the poultry-yard, because she finds more maize and wheat there than in the neighbouring forest. I do not speak of the cat, to whom we are nothing more than a too large and uneatable prey: the ferocious cat, whose sidelong contempt tolerates us only as encumbering parasites in our own homes. She, at least, curses us in her mysterious heart; but all the

others live beside us as they might live beside a rock or a tree. They do not love us, do not know us, scarcely notice us. They are unaware of our life, our death, our departure, our return, our sadness, our joy, our smile. They do not even hear the sound of our voice, so soon as it no longer threatens them; and, when they look at us, it is with the distrustful bewilderment of the horse, in whose eye still hovers the infatuation of the elk or gazelle that sees us for the first time, or with the dull stupor of the

ruminants, who look upon us as a momentary and useless accident of the pasture.

8

For thousands of years, they have been living at our side, as foreign to our thoughts, our affections, our habits, as though the least fraternal of the stars had dropped them but yesterday on our globe. In the boundless interval that separates man from all the other creatures, we have succeeded only, by dint of patience, in making them take two or three

illusory steps. And, if, to-morrow, leaving their feelings towards us untouched, nature were to give them the intelligence and the weapons wherewith to conquer us, I confess that I should distrust the hasty vengeance of the horse, the obstinate reprisals of the ass, and the rabid malice of the sheep. I should shun the cat as I should shun the tiger; and even the good cow, solemn and somnolent, would inspire me with but a wary confidence. As for the hen, with her round, quick eye, as when discovering a slug or a worm,

I am sure that she would devour me without a thought. . . .

9

Now, in this indifference and this total want of comprehension amid which all that surrounds us lives; in this incommunicable world, where everything has its object hermetically contained within itself, where every destiny is self-circumscribed, where exist among created things no other relations than those of executioners and victims, eaters and eaten, where nothing is able to leave its steel-

bound sphere, where death alone establishes cruel relations of cause and effect between neighbouring lives, where not the smallest sympathy has ever made a conscious leap from one species to another, one animal alone, among all that breathes upon the earth, has succeeded in breaking through the prophetic circle, in escaping from itself to come bounding towards us, in definitely crossing the enormous zone of darkness, ice, and silence that isolates each category of existence in nature's unintelligible plan. This animal, our good familiar

dog, simple and unsurprising as may to-day appear to us what he has done, in thus perceptibly drawing nearer to a world in which he was not born, and for which he was not destined, has nevertheless performed one of the most unusual and improbable acts that we can find in the general history of life. When was this recognition of man by beast, this extraordinary passage from darkness to light effected? Did we seek out the poodle, the sheep-dog or the greyhound from among the wolves and the jackals, or did he come spontaneously to us? We

cannot tell. So far as our human annals stretch, he is at our side, as at present; but what are human annals in comparison with the times of which we have no witness? The fact remains that he is there in our houses, as ancient, as rightly placed, as perfectly adapted to our habits as though he had appeared on this earth, such as he now is, at the same time as ourselves. We have not to gain his confidence or his friendship: he is born our friend; while his eyes are still closed, already he believes in us: even before his birth, he has

given himself to man. But the word "friend" does not exactly depict his affectionate worship. He loves us and reveres us as though we had drawn him out of nothing. He is, before all, our creature full of gratitude and more devoted than the apple of our eye. He is our intimate and impassioned slave, whom nothing discourages, whom nothing repels, whose ardent trust and love nothing can impair. He has solved, in an admirable and touching manner, the terrifying problem which human wisdom would have to solve if a

divine race came to occupy our globe. He has loyally, religiously, irrevocably recognized the superiority of man and has surrendered himself to him body and soul, with not an afterthought, with no idea of drawing back, reserving of his independence, his instinct and his character only the small part indispensable to the continuation of the life prescribed by nature to his species. With a certainty, an unconstraint and a simplicity that surprise us a little, deeming us better and more powerful than all that exists, he betrays, for

our benefit, the whole of the animal kingdom to which he belongs and, without scruple, denies his race, his kin, his mother and even his young.

10

But he loves us not only in his consciousness and his intelligence: the very instinct of his race, the entire unconsciousness of his species, it appears, think only of us and dream only of being useful to us. To serve us better, to adapt himself better to our different needs, he has adopted

every shape and been able infinitely to vary the faculties, the aptitudes which he places at our disposal. Is he to aid us in the pursuit of game in the plains? His legs lengthen inordinately, his muzzle tapers, his lungs widen, he becomes swifter than the deer. Does our prey hide under wood? The docile genius of the species, forestalling our desires, presents us with the basset, a sort of serpent, almost without feet, which steals into the closest thickets. Do we ask that he should drive our flocks? The same compliant genius

grants him the requisite size, intelligence, energy and vigilance. Do we intend him to watch and defend our house? His head becomes round and monstrous, in order that his jaws may be more powerful, more formidable and more tenacious. Are we taking him to the South? His hair grows shorter and lighter, so that he may faithfully accompany us under the rays of a hotter sun. Are we going up to the North? His feet grow larger, the better to tread the snow; his fur thickens, in order that the cold may not compel him to abandon

us. Is he intended only for us to play with, to amuse the leisure of our eyes, to adorn and enliven the home? He clothes himself in a sovereign grace and elegance, he makes himself smaller than a doll to sleep on our knees by the fireside, or even consents, should our fancy demand it, to appear a little ridiculous to please us.

You shall not find, in nature's immense crucible, a single living being that has shown a like suppleness, a similar abundance of forms, the same prodigious faculty of accommodation to our wishes. This is because, in

the world which we know, among the different and primitive geniuses of life that preside over the evolution of the several species, there exists not one, excepting that of the dog, that ever gave a thought to the presence of man.

It will, perhaps, be said that we have been able to transform almost as thoroughly certain of our domestic animals: our fowls, our pigeons, our ducks, our cats, our horses, our rabbits, for instance. Yes, perhaps, although such transformations are not comparable with those undergone

by the dog and although the kind of service which these animals render us remains, so to speak, invariable. In any case, whether this impression be purely imaginary or correspond with a reality, it does not appear that we feel in these transformations the same inexhaustible and engaging goodwill, the same sagacious and exclusive love. For the rest, it is quite possible that the dog, or rather the inaccessible genius of his race, troubles scarcely at all about us and that we have merely known how to make use of various aptitudes offered

by the abundant chances of life. It matters not: as we know nothing of the substance of things, we must needs cling to appearances; and it is sweet to establish that, at least in appearance, there is, on the planet where, like disowned kings, we live in solitary state, a being that loves us.

II

However the case may stand with these appearances, it is none the less certain that, in the aggregate of intelligent creatures that have rights,

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duties, a mission and a destiny, the dog is a really privileged animal. He occupies in this world a position that stands alone and is enviable among all. He is the only living being that has found and recognizes an indubitable, tangible, unexceptionable and definite god. He knows to what to devote the best that is in him. He knows to whom above him to give himself. He has not to seek for a perfect, superior, and infinite power in the darkness, amid successive lies, hypotheses and dreams. That power is there, before him; and he moves

in its light. He knows the supreme duties which we all do not know. He has a morality which surpasses all that he is able to discover within himself and which he can practise without scruple and without fear. He possesses truth in its fulness. He has a positive and certain ideal.

12

And it was thus that, the other day, before his illness, I saw my little Pelléas sitting on his tail at

the foot of my writing-table, his head a little on one side the better to question me, at once attentive and tranquil, as a saint should be in the presence of God. He was happy with the happiness which we, perhaps, shall never know, since it sprang from the smile and the approval of a life incomparably higher than his own. He was there, studying, drinking in all my looks, and he replied to them gravely, as from equal to equal, to inform me, no doubt, that, at least through the eyes, the almost immaterial organ that

transformed into affectionate intelligence the light which we enjoyed, he well knew that he was saying to me all that love should say. And, when I saw him thus, young, ardent and believing, bringing me, in some wise, from the depths of unwearied nature, quite fresh news of life, trusting and wonder-struck, as though he were the first of his race that had come to inaugurate the earth and as though we were still in the first days of the world's existence, I envied the gladness of his certainty, compared it with the destiny of man, still plunged

on every side in darkness, and said to myself that the dog who meets with a good master is the happier of the two.

THE END

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